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## Learning to Work with Immigrant Families: An Experiment in Experiential Learning

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# Learning to Work with Immigrant Families: An Experiment in Experiential Learning

## **Abstract**

This study examined what students in three professional programs – Nursing, Social Work, and Early Childhood Studies – could learn about working with immigrant families using narrative inquiry as a heuristic device. Data collected from the students in focus groups demonstrated their capacity for ethical caring by recognizing individual characteristics of immigrant families, becoming more self-aware in interactions with them, and noticing institutional practices from the families' perspectives. The students also began to realize the uncertainties of professional practice, which could help promote the habit of reflection. Findings suggest that the experiment was worthwhile, albeit limited by self-reported data, a small sample, and a short duration.

Dans cette étude, nous examinons ce que les étudiants inscrits dans trois programmes professionnels – soins infirmiers, travail social et études de la petite enfance – pourraient apprendre sur le travail avec des familles d'immigrants par le biais de l'enquête narrative en tant qu'instrument heuristique. Les données recueillies auprès des étudiants réunis en groupes de discussion ont indiqué que ceux-ci avaient prouvé leur aptitude à l'empathie éthique en reconnaissant les caractéristiques individuelles des familles d'immigrants, en devenant davantage conscients de leurs interactions avec ces familles et en prenant conscience des pratiques institutionnelles à partir du point de vue de ces familles. Les étudiants ont également commencé à comprendre les incertitudes de la pratique professionnelle, ce qui pourrait favoriser de meilleures habitudes de réflexion. Les résultats suggèrent que l'expérience était appréciable, bien qu'elle ait été limitée par des données auto-déclarées, un échantillon limité et une courte durée.

## **Keywords**

working with immigrant families, professional programs, pre-service training

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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According to the National Household Survey of 2011, nearly half of the population of Toronto Census Metropolitan Area was born outside Canada and one third of this population had arrived after 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Most immigrant families who have made Toronto home are likely to need the services of Early Childhood Educators, Nurses, or Social Workers as they settle in their new city. Students in Toronto's colleges and universities preparing to work in these professions are therefore very likely to work with a racially and ethnically diverse immigrant population.

College and university instructors who prepare students to work in the above professions design and teach courses focusing on principles of anti-racism, anti-oppression, equity and diversity, which the latter are expected to interpret and apply in their future professional practice (Baines, 2007; Danso, 2012). All of the above professional programs also include field placements (also called practicums or internships) to help students gain experiential knowledge and skills, and become familiar with institutional contexts in which they will work. While placement experiences are recognized as highly influential in students' conceptions of their professional practice (Bogo, 2012; Fook, 2002), there is not always a good match between abstract ideas that students learn in their theoretical courses at colleges and universities and the practices they observe at placement sites (Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan, 2013). Even where there is some congruence between theory and practice, the link between the two is not necessarily obvious to students (Allen, 2011). The different mandates, priorities, and experiences of those who work with students in the different institutional contexts make it difficult for them to help students make connections between the theoretical and the practical.

Students think of instructors in classrooms and in field placements as sources of authoritative knowledge and judges of their performance. It is therefore difficult for students to critique what they learn from either. During their placement, their attention is primarily geared towards gaining the approval of their instructors. Therefore, they focus much more on their role performance (Delany & Watkin, 2009) and operational competence rather than on meeting the needs of clients (Vanlaere, Coucke, & Gastmans, 2010). Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, they emulate their instructors based on the apprenticeship model of learning (Smith & Avetisian, 2011), and begin to form habits of thought and action, which are subsequently difficult to dislodge (Bourdieu, 1990).

To shift students' attention from themselves to their clients, we developed and tested a strategy to find out what they could learn by engaging directly with immigrant families. The specific objectives of this pilot project were to provide upper level students in the three programs offered at a university in Toronto, an opportunity to learn an ethic of care in working with immigrant families, using the writing of family narratives as a heuristic device. We wanted to find out what they could learn as a result of this experience and whether it would be worthwhile to include such experiences in their field education curriculum, and possibly in other similar programs as well.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This project drew upon the interconnected frameworks of ethic of care, experiential learning, reflective practice, and narrative inquiry. The term "ethic of care" is used by Nel Noddings (2002, 2010) to refer to the sense of moral obligation associated with specific professional roles, as in teaching, nursing, and social work. Scholars such as Hankivsky (2005) and Tronto (2013) compare the logic of caring relationships with the logic of fairness, which

informs the justice approach. They call for the creation and maintenance of caring relationships between service providers and users of public services. The normative standards for such relationships include service providers' commitment to thinking with and on behalf of those they serve, through attentive listening and dialogue, leading to a shared control of decisions and actions. Noddings (2002) reminds us that while we can care *about* people we do not know in an abstract way, we can only care *for* those with whom we have developed a relationship. Thus, caring for someone requires greater sensitivity to individuals and their contexts (Vanlaere et al., 2010), which is more challenging in settings where there are significant differences between service providers and users (Rabin & Smith, 2013).

Institutional contexts in which service providers and users typically encounter each other are often characterized by power differentials between the two. Brooker (2011) claims that in such contexts, "tokenistic" listening simply reinforces their differences of power and status. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that a more ethical stance would require service providers to serve their clients with "an openness to the difference of the Other" (p. 104). This may increase the service providers' professional uncertainty, but it may also open up new possibilities (see Vanlaere et al., 2010). Noddings (2012) reminds us that "receptive attention" (p. 54) to one's clients is based not on a sense of pity but on one's moral obligation as an ethical professional. Other scholars (Barnes & Brannelly, 2008; Juujarvi, 2006) suggest that public institutions shaped by ethical caring help us collectively move towards a society that is ultimately more just and equitable.

Some terms that are closely associated with ethic of care in the field of healthcare include "client-centred," "person-centered," or "patient-centered" service provision, which signify individualized, contextually sensitive service provision (Morgan & Yoder, 2012, p. 6). Based on this model, service providers offer appropriate and sufficient information but clients make decisions about the course of actions to follow. Although such conceptual models are taught in many professional preparatory programs, practitioners continue to struggle with the interpretation and implementation of these ideas. Some of their difficulty may be attributed to a lack of conceptual clarity or institutional support, fear of loss of power and control, lack of communication skills, and insufficient time.

The second major concept used in this study is experiential learning. John Dewey in his seminal work (1938/1998) described the significance of direct, first-hand experience in learning. Many educators have drawn upon this work to set up schools, programs, courses, placements and internships. Kolb (1984) identified four key components of experiential learning: (a) concrete experiences, (b) review and reflection, (c) formation of abstract concepts, and (d) application to new situations. Proponents of experiential learning suggest that concrete experiences are translated through reflection into concepts, which in turn guide the choice of further actions and experiences. However, critiques of experiential learning in professional preparation suggest that the discipline-specific and performance-focused nature of most placements / internships are rather limiting, and neglect the socio-cultural, heuristic, and interpretive aspects of learning (Delany & Watkin, 2009; Sleeter, 2008).

Reflective practice is the third major concept used in this paper. At its core, this means a deliberate examination of one's thoughts and actions, usually in the context of professional practice. Donald Schön (1983, 1987) made a major contribution to our understanding of reflective practice and how to prepare professionals to make it a part of their "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1990). Schön's descriptions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, as well as metacognitive reflection upon one's reflections, provide a model for the preparation of

professionals in many fields. Fook (2002) added to this work by suggesting that reflection on one's own and others' perspectives on cultural, political, social, linguistic and ideological locations, as well as historical antecedents of these positions, are important aspects of professional reflexivity. Building further on these ideas, Owen and Stupans (2009) propose that students should also undertake reflection-for-action, which goes beyond the evaluation of their own performance, or of the institution in which they are placed, to planning for action.

Narrative inquiry is the fourth framework used in this study. This involves the narration, recording, and analyses of stories of experience. Narratives are constructed from personal, historical, and socio-cultural experiences that structure our present and guide our future thoughts and actions. In creating our narratives, we select, elaborate, and interpret our experiences from the past, while also making judgments about what we want our listeners to know. For the listener, the elaborated narrative is much more useful than just the factual information (Bochner, 2001).

The use of narratives as a heuristic device is an old tradition, which can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics* and Augustine's *Confessions* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narratives have been used in teacher education (Doyle & Carter, 2003; Rossiter, 2002) nursing (Diekelmann, 2003; Ironside, 2003), and social work (Balen, Rhodes, & Ward, 2010; Noble, 2001). Those who use them for instructional purposes claim that they help students link theory and practice; appreciate different perspectives; interpret contextually embedded, complex, and evolving situations; and develop tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. They are engaging, memorable, and credible, and invite students to navigate open situations rather than reach premature conclusions. Information provided through narratives is much richer than that collected through standardized forms used by most public institutions.

Reissman and Quinney (2005) claim that narratives facilitate better communication across racial and class boundaries in social work. Students' assumptions, based on their social locations are challenged by narratives of families they may not otherwise encounter. However, Hankivsky (2005) suggests that empathy and benevolence are insufficient conditions for understanding the perspectives of those who are different from us. She claims that it is vital to invite the Other "to speak and be heard, to tell one's life-story, to press one's claims and point of view in one's own voice" (Fraser as cited in Hankivsky, 2005, p. 20).

Some scholars (e.g. Fook, 2002; Hendry, 2007; Shields, 2004) claim that in sharing narratives of experience we communicate our beliefs, relationships and perspectives, which can lead to new understandings. In the process of listening to others' narratives, listeners also become aware of their own implicit and unexamined beliefs (Ali, Corson, & Frankel, 2009; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Because the focus shifts from general information toward the personal and particular, narratives help develop caring relationships between listeners and speakers.

However, a key issue in drawing meanings from narratives constructed by researchers or practitioners is the challenge of accurate representation (Gambrill, 2013; Gergen & Gergen, 2006). These scholars note that personal, professional, and institutional contexts inevitably mediate understandings and interpretations of others' accounts. They suggest that a high level of self-awareness and reflexivity is necessary to analyze narratives, especially of those who are different from us and about whom we know very little.

## Method

Students in the three undergraduate programs – Early Childhood Studies, Nursing, and Social Work – typically undertake specific tasks in their placements, assigned by field-educators and by university-based faculty. In addition to these tasks, students participants in this project also documented the migration and settlement experiences of two immigrant families, including their use of services at the students' placement sites.

The project was designed on the premise that the first-hand experience of interviewing immigrant families will create an “internally persuasive discourse” for the students, which may help them connect, question, or even disrupt the “authoritative discourses” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342) they typically encountered as students at their universities and placement sites. While we were aware of the risk of the students' premature interpretations and overgeneralizations based on their interactions with a small number of immigrant families, we believed the learning experience may be worth the risk.

In its entirety, the project involved interviews and focus group discussions with five faculty members, six field educators (professionals in the field who supervised the placement student), either one or two members of twelve immigrant families, and six students. The reason for including all these groups was to ascertain if the students' learning was a worthwhile experience, and whether it should be included in their field placement tasks on a regular basis.

The research question that guided this part of our inquiry was: What can students in the three programs learn from documenting the narratives of immigrant families, including their experiences with service in the students' professional fields? Given our epistemological orientation, the nature of the research project, and the guiding question, we took a qualitative approach to this inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Three researchers, one from each program, organized and conducted focus group discussions or individual interviews with the students, field educators, and faculty colleagues. This paper draws exclusively from the data collected from the students.

Following the approval from the university's ethics board, the six students – two from each program – were asked to (a) participate in a focus group discussion at the beginning and at the end of the project, (b) interview two immigrant families two or three times each – with individual or multiple members – to document their settlement experiences in Canada, including their encounters with services in their field, and (c) edit and summarize the interview transcripts with the participation of the respective families, to give narrative coherence to the families' experiences.

A research assistant announced the project in 3<sup>rd</sup>- or 4<sup>th</sup>-year classes asking students to contact her if they and their field educators were both interested in participating in this project. A flyer with a brief description of the project, along with the responsibilities of all parties, was given to the students to get initial consent. Students whose field educators also agreed to participate in the project were given an orientation by the research team and a training session, using professional actors as respondents in a simulation exercise, on how to conduct semi-structured interviews. The field educators then introduced the students to families who had been living in Canada for less than ten years and were able to communicate in English. Each of the six students recruited two families (a total of twelve families) who agreed to participate in the project. Women represented most of the families. In some cases, however, a husband and wife pair, or a parent and child pair, were the interviewees. The students interviewed the families using a loosely structured interview guide, audio-recorded and transcribed the data, then

summarized and edited the family's narrative with their participation or approval, and gave them a copy of the document.

To figure out what the students had learned from their experiences of documenting the immigrant families' narratives, four focus group discussions were conducted with the students, two at the beginning and two at the end of the project, taking into account their different schedules. Each group consisted of three or four participants. Although demographic information about the students was not formally asked for, three of the students self-identified as children of immigrant parents during the focus group discussion. The following analysis is based on data recorded at these group sessions, which were also transcribed in full.

Using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Straus, 2014), we first read the entire transcripts, focusing on the research question. This helped us generate some open codes, which were provisionally compiled into axial codes. Using an iterative process, we re-examined our theoretical frameworks and data, as well as the links among the open and the axial codes, and reorganized them hierarchically into primary and subsidiary units of meanings. Finally, we used selective coding to choose quotes that best illustrated our themes and subthemes, which are presented in the following section.

## **Findings**

### **Attention to Individual Characteristics**

As noted above, a key feature of ethic of care is the care-provider's focus on individuals and their particular contexts. Several students acknowledged that they knew about immigrant families at an abstract level based on general public discourse, readings in their courses, and for some, knowledge of their parents' and other relatives' experiences as immigrants, but hearing from immigrant families directly was a much more profound experience. A Social Work student described the experience in the following words:

Let's put all the theory away, let's put all the journals away, let's put all that information away and actually see for ourselves what is really happening. I have read about immigrant families and I have done a lot of my own research and essays ... on immigrant families. But let me just...learn the things that I've never done before. Go and see for yourself what is ... really happening.

Although the students had read or heard about the high rates of unemployment and poverty among recent immigrants, they had not quite grasped what that could mean in terms of everyday experiences. A Social Work student was surprised to learn the details of and the level of financial insecurity some immigrant families had to face:

... we understand from an objective point of view what immigrants go through but I think it really makes a difference when you talk to them one-on-one and get to hear their story, just knowing you may not be able to pay the month's rent today or you don't know what you are going to have for supper!

Some students did not just feel empathy but also admiration for the families they interviewed. One of the Early Childhood Studies students said:

I already knew that immigrant families, they struggle a lot, but hearing their experiences I was more shocked. Like the first family, she has been through so much and she is so strong. I look up to her. I was like, 'Wow! I already knew this, but hearing it, and seeing her so strong is like 'Wow!'

The students became aware of not just the families' present situations but also their past histories, which is another aspect of ethical care. An Early Childhood Studies student said:

And another thing I learned, you know, you have to realize that these people were 'somebody' back home, and you know they had a profession, they were probably rich and were really well off. And they come here and they are 'nobodies', they have to start from scratch, so it is just like those little things as well. I don't think we really appreciate who they were back home. They come into our culture and we label them as immigrants and we don't know; they could have been a doctor and here you know they are working in a factory.

Students who had assumed that all immigrant families lacked adequate incomes, appropriate information, and social networks, were very surprised to find out that some of them were quite wealthy and well-travelled, had high-status careers and were also able to secure good jobs in Canada. An Early Childhood Studies student commented:

The second family I interviewed was really well off. The wife was a doctor in the genetics department [at the local children's hospital]. The husband was into media, like filmmaking and stuff. So that was another surprise for me because I was like 'How did they go up there in such little time?'

A Nursing student said that her assumptions about immigrants being grateful for the publicly funded healthcare they received in Canada were challenged:

My expectation was that they would embrace our system and enjoy that our healthcare is free ... in fact one of the families would prefer [it] to be privatized because she does not like waiting in the ER; she does not like waiting at the doctor's. She would rather pay the money.

Several students recognized that they subconsciously held stereotypical views about immigrants. One student in the Early Childhood Studies program acknowledged that she always thought of immigrant families as needy and rather hapless. She said, "I was very surprised that they knew what to do and where to go, so that completely changed my perspective." A Nursing student similarly acknowledged, "...my assumptions were all wrong."

What was particularly helpful in challenging the students' stereotypical images of immigrant families was the comparison they were able to make between the two families they had interviewed. One of the Nursing students said:

There were many things that were surprising. But I would say what surprised me the most was the difference between the two families and their values and ideals. So one family, she would have a greater belief in healthcare providers being culturally considerate. For



example, she had an issue with the gowns in the hospital being too short. That's something I wouldn't even think of...In contrast, the other family...liked the Western values, Western ideals...[One] family wanted natural remedies where the other family wanted pills and medication, things that are medically proven.

### **Self-Awareness**

For several of the students the realization of their own habits of mind and behaviour provided powerful insights about their professional selves, which is what reflective practitioners strive for. The process of interviewing families “for real” was challenging for some students but also offered important learning opportunities. A Social Work student who realized her respondents were as nervous as she was at the beginning of the interview found she could use self-deprecating humour to put them at ease. She reported:

I could tell they were nervous so I said, “Don't be nervous, I'm nervous, too!” So we were in this together. I'm like, we were all in that together and I was learning and they were learning and I was going to make mistakes and be embarrassed by something that I might say or I might misinterpret what they are saying. So I think it was a learning experience for me but it was also a learning experience for them to know that we are all starting from scratch and we just have to help each other out.

Another Social Work student found that she did not know what to say when a respondent asked her to explain what she wanted to know about her immigration experiences because she was not an immigrant herself. However, she began telling the family about her parents' experiences, which started “a conversation, instead of me interviewing them,” which opened up the space for a productive exchange.

A Nursing student said she ran out of questions designed for two interviews in one session because she was nervous. She then resorted to asking nursing assessment questions simply because she was familiar with them. Similarly, a Social Work student said that because of her inexperience in interviewing clients she talked too much, not giving the respondent sufficient time to elaborate what she wanted to say, especially in the first interview. Her relative familiarity, both with the interview process and with the respondent, made the next interview much easier and generated more data.

Although transcribing the interviews was the most tedious aspect of the project for students, they said they did not want someone else to do this because listening to the audio-recordings offered several opportunities for self-reflection. Some students became conscious of their own habits of speaking and listening. One of the Nursing students said:

I noticed I say “You guys” all the time. So unprofessional! [It] gave me an awareness of how you're coming across professionally .... The “So's and Uhm's” starting your conversations, I was very shocked that I did that. So that's a learning experience. As well, I am a very timid person in uncomfortable situations .... And I would hear what they are saying but I wasn't listening.

Another Nursing student noted that while she was interviewing a woman with a different accent, she glossed over what she did not understand and simply nodded as if she fully

understood everything. When she tried to transcribe the interview from her recorder, she discovered that there were many things her interviewee said that she did not fully understand. Aghast at what she had found out while listening to her audio-recorder, she said, “That’s really risky! What if I make a mistake based on what I think she may have said, rather than what she actually said!”

Transcribing the semi-structured interviews also provided students the opportunity to reflect on the specific words they had used, or the sequence of their questions. An Early Childhood Studies student commented:

When I was transcribing I was like “Oh did I really say that? That’s impressive! I don’t know if that was fine.” I was over-analyzing everything. I was like “Why did I say that? I wish I would have said it differently. Or I wish I would have asked this question before this question.” Just kind of like analyzing everything. And I like that part, the transcription part because it kind of makes you self-reflect and go back and see “Okay this is what I said, I should really go back and work on this skill. Okay maybe I should really do this and that.”

### **Awareness of Institutional Practices**

Asking families about services they had used helped the students become more sharply aware of institutional practices that they had not specifically paid attention to, or had taken for granted. They also began to consider some of these practices from the perspectives of new immigrants. For example, one of the Nursing students learned that some immigrant women found it embarrassing to wear the short hospital gown, which bared their legs in public. Another student in the same program found out that newcomers in Ontario have to wait three months to qualify for their provincial health cards, without which they cannot access most medical services. Because the student had not encountered this issue in her personal or academic experiences, she had incorrectly assumed that everyone living in this province had full access to healthcare services. Similarly, a student in the Early Childhood Studies program discovered that some immigrant families do not know where to go when they need childcare in an emergency. She figured out that some organizations provided emergency care for children, if their parents had to deal with an emergency. She said she would pass on this information to immigrant parents of young children who often do not know whom to turn to when they need childcare in an emergency.

One of the Early Childhood Studies students noticed that although interactions with families are rhetorically promoted in institutions such as family support programs, their structures and cultures don’t necessarily facilitate a deep level of engagement. She said:

I felt privileged to be able to hear the story, you know it felt very intimate also. And I could ask questions that you can’t necessarily ask when you are in a drop-in centre and you are sitting beside somebody, and you know, watching their child play. It’s a different thing to be able to ask those direct questions.

## Encounters with Uncertainties

Students in all three programs take required courses in research methods, interpersonal communication, and the practicum as a part of their professional preparation. Most of them participate in simulations representing interactions with clients, or engage with them directly under supervision of field educators. However, they encountered many more uncertainties as they stepped out of controlled environments where they had no predetermined scripts or models for enacting their professional roles. An Early Childhood Studies student noted this difference:

...we had classes where we would interview a friend, that was part of our assignment but this, even though we had placement and interacted with the families and stuff, this was more, like, this was what we would do when we graduate, right?

A Social Work student echoed the same sentiment:

And we've done [this] in classes, social work classes, we've done 'acting' with service users but it is very different than when you actually go into the field and talk to someone and really interview them. And it is different interviewing a person who is new to the country than someone who is maybe a professor, or a friend, or somebody else. It is different.

As noted above, students in this project were given some training in using the semi-structured interview guides but then conducted the family interviews on their own. A Nursing student, more used to asking specific questions on a list, became quite unsure about her interactions with a respondent. Having reviewed her interview script, she said:

Ugh, the person just told me [something significant about his life] and I don't know how to respond, I don't know if I am using the right words, or if I should be asking a question right now. What do I say? It's ok? You know, I can normalize this experience, you know, but he doesn't want to be normalized right now. I don't know: sometimes I just don't know what to say to the participants, I just don't know what to say. I am just so shocked, or I just wanted to say it was ok, but it's not really going to be ok. So sometimes it was just challenging. Like, mostly like I just don't know what the right words are, like what is going to hit it straight home and what's going to make it or break it, so I don't know.

Some students' uncertainties also led them to new insights about how to interact with the families. A Social Work student, who was taken aback by a highly emotional response from a male participant discovered her own counselling skills, and ultimately found the experience quite rewarding. She related her experience thus:

One of my interview participants, when I was talking to them, they hadn't been talked to like that before, even though they had met social workers before. I was so surprised! They were really, really touched [so much] that they started crying. And I didn't expect it, so I was just like "Oh My God, What do I do?" Because they were crying, right? And you know when it catches you off guard, like I haven't really been in those situations, so

I was like “I don’t know what to do!” But, no, I took care of it ... and they were so touched by that. It was like counselling for them, he said “Whenever I come here I go back happy.” Yeah, it was really like he hasn’t been treated like that, so this was really good for him, it was really good for both of us. I didn’t expect that sort of reaction also, that they were so appreciative. I kept saying “Thank you for coming to meet with me” and they would say “No, thank YOU!”

The students’ uncertainties also led them to question the universality of what they had learned in school or at their placement site. A Nursing student, who had consistently been taught to try to modify her practice to culturally “different” clients, said that the immigrant woman she interviewed just wanted to be treated like everyone else.

She kind of felt like, “I don’t have any problem, I’m totally fine.” She even said she doesn’t think it’s the health care provider’s responsibility to find out about a patient culturally, or to be considerate to a patient culturally. She felt like it’s a person’s own responsibility to let the health care provider know about anything they need to know. She said that health care providers don’t have the time to give custom care. So that’s kind of interesting because that goes against what we are trying to achieve. So that’s also listening in that way because if you try and force your values on someone who is trying to tell you, I don’t need special attention.

The student concluded that it was through interactions with people that she could truly create her own professional persona, and those interactions were an important aspect of her professional ethics. She said:

It is kind of like you study for four years with the books and everything, you are a professional but when you go through with the people you build your own ethics and you build your own beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, and it makes you a better professional, right?

A Nursing student, who said she had always taken pride in her uniform as a marker of her professional identity, noted that it was also a symbol of power and authority, which could potentially create a distance between herself and her clients. She said:

And being in a uniform, they are receptive to you in a different way. I think because they look and see someone in a uniform it’s like “Oh my gosh she is a nurse!” ... I think with [being] professional comes a lot of power, which creates a lot of barriers and gaps between, when you deal with immigrant families especially. But when I find you are more comfortable, you don’t let go of your professional boundaries but you loosen up a bit so it is more natural and the power goes down and they feel better. It’s like what [another nursing student] said, normal clothes, and you’re at their level now and that really gets a lot out of them.

But discarding the uniform to become more “comfortable” with clients also meant relinquishing the power and authority it signified, which could inspire greater trust. The student pointed to her dilemma in the following words:

Listening to my recordings I feel [our interactions] weren't professional. I felt too comfortable. But I don't know if that's a good thing because then they opened up a lot to me. Being in the community in my regular clothes, I want to be able to affect these families and most of my population was immigrant families. But how do you develop that trust, how do you look welcoming for someone to want to speak to you?

## Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to find out what students in three professional programs could learn by documenting narratives of immigrant families' lives. The heuristic value of this experience was evident in many ways.

Noddings (2010) and other scholars (Hankivsky, 2005; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013) tell us that receptive attention to particular individuals and their contexts is a hallmark of ethical caring. The students showed ample evidence of their capacity for detailed, nuanced, and differentiated understandings of the immigrant families they interviewed. They learned about particular individuals and their families, their present and their past, their beliefs and their practices (Noddings, 2002). This was much more than "tokenistic listening" (Brooker, 2011). They frequently commented that the families they interviewed were different from their preconceived ideas about immigrant families. More importantly, they learned that there were significant differences even between the two families they interviewed, which challenged their notions about immigrant families as a category of people with the same characteristics.

In the process of documenting the families' narratives, the students also developed greater awareness of how they interacted with them. They had to put the families at ease to learn about significant details of their lives. Some used self-deprecating humour or memory of other experiences when they were at a loss about what to say. Others learned to listen with full attention and to notice it when they did not do so. Yet others learned about the risks of decisions based on less than careful listening, or unfamiliarity with some cultural beliefs, or insufficient information about the families' access to resources. Some students began to check their own proclivity to stereotype others and realized that they should withhold judgment when they do not have sufficient information. Furthermore, they began to realize that their prior knowledge was limited, and even sometimes incorrect.

Institutional practices the students had never questioned before, such as the length of hospital gowns, the lack of time and space for conversations with parents in family support programs, and the symbolic power of nurses' uniforms acquired new meanings when viewed from the perspectives of immigrant families. Some of them also noted how institutional contexts created power differentials between service providers and users (Rinaldi, 2006).

The above examples demonstrate the students' capacity for reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Not only were they able to critically examine their personal tendencies as well as institutional practices, but they also became aware of the perils of not reflecting on them. The students provided many examples of reflection-on-action and also showed that they were capable of reflection-in-action in their accounts of how they handled new and challenging situations, and could project what they would do in their future workplaces, as examples of reflection-for-action (Owen & Stupans, 2009).

The students' attention to particular features of immigrant families, their reflection on interactions with them, and their ability to view institutional practices from the families' perspectives collectively demonstrated their capacity for developing caring relationships with

families they would serve in the future. But perhaps the most valuable lesson they learned was the uncertainty of professional practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Vanlaere et al., 2010), and the limitations of what one can learn from one's own experiences, classroom instruction, and field experiences. Students noticed that their past experiences did not always help them accurately interpret or respond to new situations. They discovered what they had learned from books and professors still has to be appropriately selected, interpreted and applied (Baines, 2007; Danso, 2012). They also found that models of professional practice they had seen, and institutional contexts in which they had observed these practices, did not necessarily prepare them to respond to complex, different, and changing needs of clients they will serve (Delany & Watkin, 2009). They began to realize that as future professionals they will not always know what they need to know about people they serve. Instead, they will have to question institutional contexts in which they work, as well as critically examine their own knowledge and skills and reflect on their own habits of the mind. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Vanlaere et al. (2010) have signalled, the students' greater sensitivity to individuals they serve and their contexts, along with the recognition of their personal and institutional limitations, could open up their minds to new possibilities. Their instructors will have the challenging but essential task of preparing them to meet their professional obligations but also to continually question their personal and institutional practices. To do this, the university-based faculty and the field-educators will both have to humbly acknowledge the limits of what they can teach the students. They will have to help their students recognize the indeterminate and contingent nature of their professional preparation and yet be ready take on the professional responsibilities they will be charged with.

### **Conclusion**

Documenting the narratives of immigrant families was clearly a worthwhile experience for students who participated in this project. They gained important insights about immigrant families, their own habits of mind, and institutions where they would work in the future. They discovered the limitations of what they could learn at the university or at their placement sites, which is crucially important for maintaining a critical stance towards one's knowledge and skills.

The students may not be able to give the kind of attention they gave to the immigrant families in the project to the large number of clients they will serve in their workplaces, at least in the short-term. However, their experiential learning afforded them some vivid examples (Elbaz, 1991) of what is possible to learn about families they will serve; about themselves as service providers; about the cultures of places where they will work; and above all, about the need to continue to learn. This experience could guide them as a normative ideal to work towards in the long term.

Given the significance of lessons learned by students in this study, we invite instructors of other programs preparing students for public services to consider creating similar learning opportunities for their students. They could include the experiment described above in field education courses to help students learn about indigenous families, or those who live in poverty, or have disabilities, or are 'different' from the students in other ways. Instructors could emphasize throughout their program that coursework only teaches some general principles, and placement sites offer only contextually bound examples, both of which have to be critically and selectively drawn upon in the workplace. Most importantly, instructors in both places could primarily focus on developing the students' capacity to learn, especially from those whose lives are impacted by their decisions, and at the same time keep questioning what they think they

know. They could help students learn to embrace rather than avoid uncertainty because that promotes reflective practice and ethic of care.

This article is based only on self-reported data from a small number of the students in three professional programs. While this project demonstrated significant developments in the students' capacity for ethical caring and reflective practice, further research is needed to find out if a larger number of students from a greater variety of professional programs would demonstrate similar growth. The students' responses were collected only a few months after they had completed writing the families' narratives. We do not know whether they would retain what they learned over a longer period of time. We invite other researchers to add to our collective knowledge by building on this work.

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